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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by the Asian Legal Resource Centre, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 May 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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South Asia: Governments must act to eradicate poverty

1. The Asian Legal Resource Centre (ALRC) draws the attention of the Human Rights Council to the persistence of extreme poverty in Asian countries. This condition is further deteriorated by widespread hunger and lack of livelihood opportunities, which have made poverty a chronic condition. Most Asian countries have ratified various covenants that make it mandatory for the state to provide basic rights and living conditions of its citizens. While there have been reductions in poverty levels in several countries, unequal nature of development and skewed policies indicate that a majority of the population in these countries still have to face chronic hunger and poverty.

2. A cursory glance at poverty and hunger levels in various countries indicates the gravity of the situation. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics indicates that poverty levels have declined to 31.5% in 2010 compared to 40% in 2005. However, the analysis put urban poverty levels at 21.3% (it was 28.4% in 2005) and rural poverty levels at 35.2% (43.8% in 2005). The persistence of rural poverty needs attention as lack of resources and infrastructural deficit perpetuates poverty. There is also need for effective policies that do not lead more households to fall into extreme poverty. Despite succeeding in reducing the number of underweight children (down to 36% in 2011 from a precariously high 66% in 2005), the sheer number of malnourished children still remains unacceptably high. On its part, the Bangladesh government has conceded that it could ensure support for only 24.57% of households with at least one public safety net program over last twelve months. The difference between the official poverty level and the number of households receiving government support exposes loopholes that plague social welfare policies in Bangladesh.

3. In the case of India, poverty, hunger, and lack of livelihood options continue to affect a majority of the population, with communities on the margin being worst affected. As much as 32.7% of Indian population lives below the globally accepted poverty line of 1.25 $ USS a day, as per World Bank data. This is substantiated by official Indian government statistics produced that pegs the poverty line at a lowly sum of 17 INR in rural and 27 INR in urban centers. The "decline" in poverty has been brought about by lowering benchmarks, not by actually protecting citizens from the vicious cycle of poverty, ill health, and more poverty.

4. The situation in Nepal is worse; a staggering 3.4 million people in Nepal live in perpetual fear of hunger. The conditions have deteriorated further due to agricultural productivity not increasing along with rise in population. Moreover, nearly 5 million people have fallen below the poverty line in Nepal the past few years; consequently, poor health, malnutrition, and hunger are becoming pressing issues for the country. According to the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (2006), half of the children below the age of 5 suffer from chronic malnourishment. The situation is at its worst in highly inaccessible regions, like the far and mid-western hilly and mountain regions. The gravity of the situation is betrayed by the fact that almost a quarter of Nepalese women have a body mass index (BMI) below normal and about 36 % of pregnant women are anemic. As per the recent Global Hunger Index in 2010, Nepal's score is 20, which make it 27th out of 84 ranked countries. Reports such as the World Food Programme mention Nepal as the country worst hit by malnutrition in Asia and places it on par with countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and Uganda. Add to this the fact that Nepal has faced substantial deficit of food grains in the past couple of years. Agricultural productivity has been on a decline since the 1980s and the share of agriculture to GDP has fallen from 66% to 38% in the past two decades without any corresponding increase in manufacturing or service sectors.

5. Conditions in Pakistan also indicate widespread poverty; figures from mountainous and far-flung regions indicate more poverty than the rest of the country, despite a real decline in poverty between 2001 and 2005. A pressing concern in Pakistan, ranked 146th out of 187 countries on the United Nations Development Programme's 2013 Human Development Index, is agricultural reform, without which no improvements are expected. With a sizable section of the population dependent on agriculture, single crop failure due to any reason pushes scores of families into the debt trap. The scarcity of water resources compounds the problem, more so in areas like Tharparkar in Sindh, which has no irrigation channels of its own and is completely dependent on rains for water needs. This reflects in the geographical variations in the incidence of poverty in Pakistan, where the coastal belt and low rainfall areas also suffer from higher incidence of poverty.

6. Politically, these problems are often compounded by the neoliberal model of development, which has left large sections of national populations impoverished, forcing states to withdraw from welfare schemes and service delivery

systems. Among the factors perpetuating food insecurity in the region, faulty prioritization of concerns by national elites requires mention. At the ground level, weak and opaque delivery mechanisms exacerbate the problem. That corruption is rampant across Asia is something internationally accepted; most of the funds meant for target communities rarely reach them intact. Embezzlement, theft, and corruption in the system are part of life in many of these countries and allow only a small amount of funds to reach intended beneficiaries. This malfeasance is guarded by the lack of transparency, no checks and balances, and the lack of the rule of law.

7. It is in this context that the United Nations Human Rights Council, a vital global institution, must intervene and press upon South Asian governments to snatch their citizens back from the maws of poverty. This would require the United Nations and the various bodies and people associated with it to inquire into the structural impediments that perpetuate poverty. They must criticize these countries for having virtually abandoned a section of their population, while allowing for spectacular economic growth for others.

8. The Asian Legal Resource Centre urges the Council to:

a. Ask the respective governments to identify structures that perpetuate poverty and stop citizens living in extreme poverty from the full enjoyment of their human rights. The council must ask the governments to take immediate steps to protect and promote the peoples' rights;

b. Ask the governments to pay particular attention to the marginalized and dispossessed communities, such as women, elderly, the disabled, and those hailing from lower castes, classes, and indigenous communities. The council must also ask the governments to investigate discrimination along caste, communal, and gender lines and bring an end to the same as such discrimination perpetuates poverty, and;

c. The Council must also ask the governments to engage with the people living in extreme poverty when making policies for their benefit.